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Internationally comparative research on minority and immigrant adolescents' social, emotional, and
behavioral development

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The study of immigrant youth development has been an issue for numerous decades now and research in this area can only be expected to grow further due to the unprecedented increase in international migration [1] and the high and ever increasing rates of young (15-29 years) newcomer migrants worldwide. Population growth in many developed countries (e.g. throughout Europe and the U.S.) is driven increasingly by positive net migration and decreasingly by natural population increases [2]. This means that greater proportions of these populations will comprise youth with immigrant backgrounds. Thus, it is not surprising that researchers find it essential to investigate the physical and mental health of immigrant adolescents as well as their satisfaction with life. With the development of this field of research, however, there have emerged two core guiding issues: first, the methodological approaches utilized and viewed as most appropriate to comprehensively understand the immigrant development [3, 4], and second, the theoretical perspectives postulating how immigration itself might be a positive versus negative experience in the development of immigrants [5]. Below we will discuss how Stevens and her colleagues' article [6] falls along these two core issues.

The field of acculturation research, particularly on adolescent immigrants, has grown dynamically over the past decades, which is demonstrated in the number of publications in immigrant adolescents (see Figure 1). As research on acculturation was only just beginning, the primary methodological approach focused on the importance of group-level changes as a result of migration with the basic idea that immigrants would/should adapt to the new culture while shedding their heritage [7]. This thinking was followed by a more differentiated view on multidimensional adaptation, an emphasis on individual differences in the psychological and sociocultural adjustment, and on cross-cultural comparisons [4]. Although the diversification in acculturation research provided a more comprehensive understanding of the complex acculturation processes, it also created a research gap on the universality and specificity of acculturation processes. Hence, presently, there has been a call for researchers to uncover both unique and universal experiences of immigrant youth, utilizing cross-comparative designs

[3]. Moreover, this has further been met with calls by others over the need for research to attend to the contextual differences in the lived experiences of different immigrant groups [8-10].



Figure 1: Frequency of the term “adolescent immigrants” in book publications. Source: Google’s Ngram Viewer, smoothing factor: 3

In general, this research has focused on two overarching views about immigrant youth adaptation. The first, rather negative, view would argue that the immigration to a new country is associated with higher levels of stress, which can overburden immigrant adolescents’ coping abilities [11] so that the psychological and physical well-being is threatened. In a similar vein, research has shown that immigration to a new country can be seen as a phase transition [12]- a situation, in which established behavioral patterns are destabilized and a new reorganization in the developmental system becomes necessary. In such a situation, protective factors are less effective in keeping adolescents from negative outcomes, such as delinquency, whereas risk factors can increase in their negative effects [13]. According to this first view, acculturation is likely to be associated with more negative psychosocial outcomes. However, empirical results do not always support this negative view on adaptation outcomes among immigrants. A large and growing body of research has repeatedly found better adaptation of immigrants than would be expected given the cumulated risks, the additional stressors, and the loss of stabilizing social networks through the transition to another country. This phenomenon is the second, more positive, view and has been referred to as immigrant paradox [e.g. 14]. However, whereas studies in the

U.S. repeatedly found an immigrant paradox, studies in Europe revealed only little evidence [15]. These inconclusive results and the upsurge in diversity of the immigrant experience both call for cross-comparative studies such as the research presented by Stevens and her colleagues in this volume.

Stevens and her colleagues [6] address many comparative issues in their impressive multinational assessment of adolescent immigrants' emotional and behavior problems. Their cross-comparative analysis sampled participants from over 20 home countries in 10 receiving countries. Their cross-sectional design covers an age range from early-adolescence to mid-adolescence- a period of development theorized to uniquely complicate the process of acculturation [3]. From their findings a clear picture emerges of the commonly experienced hardships of immigrant youth- namely, lower levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of physical fighting and bullying. However, their findings also add to the inconsistent results regarding the immigrant paradox as they showed fewer psychosomatic problems among immigrants in the U.S. They laudably conducted sensitivity analyses and used the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX, <http://www.mipex.eu>) data to account for the contextual differences across their groups, yet effect sizes varied and decreased when family affluence was taken into account. Taken together, these findings offer clear and universal implications for immigration policy across the world, yet their limitations also provide further support for investigation into the complex contextual realities of immigrant youth.

One particular challenge is the heterogeneity of immigrant groups. Stevens et al. [6] provided a detailed listing of the various and diverse immigrant groups studied in each of their comparison countries. This diversity poses a challenge for the generalizability of any acculturation results. The US, for example, is host to people from 181 different countries, Canada hosts 156 nationalities, France 136 nationalities, and Germany 130 nationalities – to name just the top four diverse societies from a recent study [16]. These groups differ substantially in cultural distance [17], types of immigrants (refugees, diaspora return migrants, guest workers, indigenous minorities etc.; [2]), and the stereotypes about them held by the majority [16, 18, 19]. Hence, future research must do more than demonstrate ethnic or

cross-country differences. Future research has to also answer the question of WHY and WHERE some groups do better than others and uncover the underlying mechanisms.

One step in this direction is to select groups for comparative research based on theoretical considerations and to predict/test differences between and within groups. For instance, the path of migration could be considered as a selection criteria. The receiving countries included in Stevens et al (this volume) are all categorized as “north” in terms of migratory paths. However, the rising prevalence of south-south migration coupled with south-south migrants’ higher rates of the most negative outcomes of immigration [2], indicate that comparisons across migratory paths is warranted. Alternatively, the selection could be based on differences in immigration policies across countries (for example as done in Stevens et al, [6], in terms of the MIPEX, though it is important to note that “migration policies do not ensure adequate protection of the human rights of *all* migrants, and public perceptions of migrants and migration have not kept pace with the reality of human mobility and are often inclined to be negative,” p. 175, [2]). Other criteria could be cultural differences of [20] or distances between specific ethnic groups [17], or on immigration conditions between immigrant groups (e.g. guest workers’ rights vs. diaspora migrants’ rights; [8]) . Research methods utilized in cross-cultural comparative studies can help to disentangle the core of ethnic differences in any outcome. Feldman and Rosenthal [21], for example, demonstrated how ethnic differences can be explained away so that the actual mechanisms that produce ethnic differences are uncovered. The key assumption in this approach is that the variable that can account for variance within a group may also explain ethnic differences between groups [21].

A second approach often suggested is the use of more elaborated statistical methods, such as multi-level modelling in Stevens et al.’s study [6], in the study of ethnic differences [22]. Multi-level models assume a nested structure of adolescent immigrants’ functioning. According to the logic of these approaches, individual outcomes depend on the individual (Level 1), on the context in which the individual is nested (Level 2) and on the fit between individual and context. The advantage of such

models is that specific dimensions can be tested on which ethnic groups or countries on Level 2 differ. Hence, it is not necessarily of interest which ethnic groups or countries are investigated. Rather, the dimensions become of interest (e.g, in terms of traditionalism or immigrant support) on which these ethnic groups or countries differ. Such multi-level models require, however, large international collaboration with many countries and groups studied to ensure sufficient variation on the higher order level; the research by Stevens et al. [6] certainly is a step towards this kind of international collaboration.

The benefit of both these highlighted approaches is that research moves away from studying particular groups, which may produce rather than eradicate ethnic stereotypes, towards more meaningful characteristics [9]. The focus on such characteristics acknowledges intragroup variation in these variables and offers prevention and intervention measures that seem less obvious when the focus is on ethnic groups as categories.

Our final point concerns the outcomes studied in research on immigrant adolescents. Scientists in this field may be perceived as obsessed with studying negative developmental outcomes (ourselves included, e.g., [23, 24]. Research on positive aspects is less often conducted. However, research has shown that adolescent immigrants are providers of support for their families, which can be a source of their self-efficacy as well as a provision of a sense of belonging and role fulfillment [25, 26]. These positive developmental outcomes hold significant implications for the growth of the individual, the group, and the home and host countries, and when “mainstreamed” into national and international policy for growth and development, can best facilitate a mutually beneficial context of migration.

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